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POULTRY-RAISING AS A SCHOOL OCCUPATION

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Ever since Comenius said "Things before words" there has been a growing demand for some kind of physical activity upon which to base the so-called "regular work" of the schools. At first one form seemed as desirable as another. Even so wise a man as Dr. E. A. Sheldon, principal of the Oswego Normal School, used to say that it mattered little about the kind of work so long as it was objective. We have been gradually coming to see that it does matter very much and that the right kind of work must possess the following among other characteristics, viz:

1. It must fit into the needs of the community of which the school is a part so that children and parents may see that it is of practical value.
2. It must give opportunities for the child to participate in the work and in the rewards of his work.
3. It must furnish opportunities for typical, basal experiences and so build up important apperceiving concept groups.
4. Things must be seen by the children in their natural relations, and ministering to the life of man.
5. It must furnish a basis for natural correlation with the regular subjects.

In a section like Cape Cod, already known in Boston and New York markets for its fine Cape Cod eggs, and in a school like our Training School, nearly every child of which may have a few hens at home, this poultry industry seems to meet all of the foregoing requirements. I have felt for some time that poultry-raising, properly conducted, might furnish a school activity equal in value to the school garden. We have, therefore, started the experiment to see how much of this work may be safely recommended to the regular public school.

We have a small plant fairly well established and incidentally have done a little educational work of the right sort. Thus far this has been done almost entirely in connection with the Normal School. We hope gradually to find points of connection with the Training School.

In the winter of 1907 a Cyphers Incubator was purchased and I began to experiment with it. The incubator was placed in my library with an experimental batch of eggs. My two little boys, aged respectively 9 and 10 years, watched and assisted in the turning of the eggs and in the care of the incubator. They heard the first faint peeps from the imprisoned chicks and watched with the greatest enthusiasm to see the little fellows struggle out of their enclosing shells. After all were hatched these chicks were transferred to a Cyphers Brooder which was placed on our lawn. The children considered it a great honor to be allowed to help care for them.

The incubator was now transferred to a small house which had been used for the school garden tools and a part of which had been partitioned off by one of our students to serve as an incubator house. This house was built into a sandy hillside and so it was possible to have an incubator room in which an even temperature could be preserved.

The business of incubation was now turned over to an energetic, faithful teacher and the incubator was kept going at its full capacity for two successive periods. It was found convenient to utilize some of these eggs at different stages of their development to illustrate Normal School work in biology. When the chicks began to hatch out the students were taken in groups to watch the process and they showed almost as much enthusiasm as my boys had shown.

After being transferred to the brooders the chicks continued to be centers of interest not only for the whole school but for visitors to the school. The question now arose as to what should be done with these chicks after they should outgrow the brooders. Here was a new problem. We must have a hen-house and we had no money for that purpose. We visited local poultrymen and obtained printed suggestions from the Cyphers Incubator Company, from the Agricultural Department at Washington, and from Orono, Maine.

We decided to make this our manual-training work for a while and to build a poultry-house after plans similar to those described in "Poultry Investigations at the Maine Agricultural Experiment Station, 1906." The School had recently constructed a coal-pocket out of reinforced concrete and had saved the lumber and some stones from the same. We dug into the south side of a very sandy hill and erected a strong retaining wall six feet in height, facing it with concrete. We erected walls of concrete two feet high on the other three sides and made a slightly sloping floor of concrete. We next erected our frame, covered it with the boards, and these with shingles. The concrete work was done in the spring principally by the men who care for the school grounds under the direction of a first-class mason. The framing of the building was done during the summer mostly by instructors and members of the manual-training class of the summer school. The shingling and a part of the interior construction was done during the autumn by the instructor and the Normal School students. As winter was fast approaching it was found necessary to have a carpenter finish up the work.

This chicken-house had thus furnished an excellent kind of manual training for the men of the school. I do not believe that it was an *excellent* kind for the young women, but it was much better for them than is the ordinary wood-working course. In fact, many advantages might be urged for it, not the least being that here was an urgent need for which they might help to provide.

As soon as the house was ready, the fowls were installed in their new and comfortable quarters. I was absent in Europe during the winter and so can only write what has been reported regarding the results. The fowls were put into the keeping of successive Normal School students, each anxious to help earn his way and willing to get some experience in poultry-raising. The instructor who was in general charge found a great difference in the quality of the work done by different students. Certain very important characteristics which were not suspected from the regular school work were clearly manifest in the poultry-house. In fact, enough has already come to me along this line to prove that here is a new and reliable means of applying practical tests and of helping students to see and correct inherent weaknesses, which might never appear in the course of regular school work.

In connection with the incubation such points as the following impressed themselves upon the students: Very much depends upon the ancestors. Eggs should be obtained from a reliable dealer who has standard fowls of a high grade. The general health of such ancestors must be good. Both the cock and the hens must be in a vigorous condition at the time of the egg-production. Even after exercising the utmost care in these matters, some eggs are not fertile and others cease to develop at various stages of the incubation period. Some chicks break through the shells but have not sufficient vitality to free themselves from them. Others are so weak after struggling forth from their shells that they are trampled upon by their more vigorous fellows. The greatest care must be exercised during the period of incubation to keep an even temperature and to prevent any jarring of the eggs. The young chicks must be fed enough but not too much, and must be given some hard food to provide work for their digestive organs. They must be given plenty of fresh air and exercise, not too much heat, and opportunity to gradually accustom themselves to the cold air and other conditions outside of their brooder.

All of these ideas and many more furnish to the Normal School students very forceful lessons which have direct application on the hygienic side of their own everyday lives.

Although not much connection has as yet been made with the children of the Training School I have myself gained some ideas of possibilities along those lines by the experiences of my own children. I have already related some of these.

After seeing their father experiment with the incubator, my boys were anxious to try raising some chicks. We discussed matters at some length and finally it was decided that the older boy might try running a small incubator which I had purchased and that the younger should set a hen. Each was interested in the experiences of the other and so both became well acquainted with the different stages of both methods of chicken-hatching.

When the young chicks were transferred from the school incubator to the brooders a few were thought not able to fight their way with the others. My boys asked for several of these unfortunates. They fed and watered them; put them out into the sunshine in the morning and behind the stove at night. They tried to straighten crooked feet and expended a vast amount of sympathy upon them. Some died and were buried with tears; others grew to be valuable members of the hen colony.

As a result of these chicken experiences and of various garden experiences they are glad to try for this winter (1908–9) the following plan. Each boy has charge of a flock of hens and a cock, one flock consisting of Rhode Island Reds and the other of Barred Plymouth Rocks. The hens are furnished; the boys do all of the work, pay for the food and sell the eggs. Each boy will have half of the profits from his flock. The lessons which they are learning could not be so well learned in any other way, and they are lessons which are becoming a valuable part of their equipment for life.

It is true, as some one objects, that such training cannot well be given to every child at school. But the school can do much. It can help to cultivate the right attitude toward this kind of work, and nearly every family in our villages and even in our small cities would find it profitable, pleasurable, and educational to teach the children how to care for a few hens.

"They knew, as God knew, that command of nature comes by obedience to nature; that reward comes by faithful service. . . . . There was no secret of labor which they disdain."—Emerson.